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Writing for this space on Sept. 15, 1982, I braved the tradition of the late Drew Pearson and made a "prediction of things to come."

"Gen. William Westmoreland will not be able to prove in court that CBS deliberately set out to destroy his reputation by saying things about him it knew to be untrue. In the courtroom, he will have to face subordinates who will admit that they did indeed falsify figures and believed they were pleasing him by doing so."

That prediction turned out to be close to precise. During the last week of the trial, Gen. Joseph McChristian and Col. Gaines Hawkins repeated before the jury the testimony they had given CBS during the broadcast. When they had finished, Gen. Westmoreland was finished, too.

I claim no prescience. In retrospect, the surprising thing about the whole exhausting and expensive lawsuit was that Gen. Westmoreland decided to bring it.

Did he think that Col. Hawkins would not repeat his assertion that he had instructions from the commanding general not to exceed the enemy-troop-strength figure of 300,000? Did he think the colonel would recant his story of how Gen. Westmoreland, after he [Hawkins] had brought the bad news of substantially higher figures, replied in anguish, "What am I going to tell the press? What am I going to tell the Congress? What am I going to tell the president?"

Did he think Gen. McChristian would not repeat his statement that the figures were cooked at Gen. Westmoreland's request? Gen. Westmoreland was worried about his

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Did the general get bad advice?

honor. But these men possessed honor, too. Why did the general suppose that he could win a lawsuit when he knew that damning evidence against him was already on the record?

My own guess is that Gen. Westmoreland received a lot of bad advice from the Jesse Helms wing of Mr. Reagan's party. No doubt he was hurt when he saw the broadcast.

The trial made it clear that he was

money for the attack.

The mail-order right had two objectives: first, it saw an opportunity to blame the press for losing the war. Second, it had been looking for a chance to use its cudgels against the kind of hard, investigative reporting which had brought down Richard Nixon and which — among television networks — has been the special pride of CBS News.

Even before the Westmoreland case failed in court, Sen. Helms and his mailing-list allies mounted a campaign to put an end to it by buying CBS.

On Gen. Westmoreland's behalf, it must be said that the trial revealed some slippery fact-finding tactics — for example, the unauthorized taping by CBS producer George Crile of a conversation with former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara — and some equally slippery production tactics — for example, the rehearsal of witnesses.

In the course of producing its documentary, CBS turned journalism into moviemaking. In that sense only, Gen. Westmoreland won a victory. From now on, the network will be more careful.

But none of this impinged upon the accuracy of the charge that Gen. Westmoreland tried in vain to set aside. During the period leading up to the Tet offensive, there was an effort, "indeed a conspiracy, to suppress and alter critical intelligence about the enemy." That was what CBS said. The general failed to disprove it.

I'm sorry for Gen. Westmoreland, a brave soldier who got caught up in the deception which politicians found necessary in order to convince the public that it should support an unnecessary war.



Gen. William C. Westmoreland